

The History of the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee*

By David K. Berninghausen†

FROM THE RECORDS of man's unending struggle to learn and know comes this extract from Thomas Jefferson's letter to Duffief in 1814:

Are we to have a censor whose imprimatur shall say what books may be sold, and what we may buy? And who is thus to dogmatize religious opinions for our citizens? Whose foot is to be the measure to which ours are all to be cut or stretched? Is a priest to be our inquisitor, or shall a layman, simple as ourselves, set up his reason as the rule for what we are to read, and what we must believe? It is an insult to our citizens to question whether they are rational beings or not, and blasphemy against religion to suppose it cannot stand the test of truth and reason. If [a book or idea] be false in its facts, disprove them; if false in its reasoning, refute it. But, for God's sake, let us freely hear both sides.

The American Library Association since 1939 has consciously promoted the concept that man's freedom to seek the truth where and how he will, without trying to fit his discoveries into predetermined patterns, is man's most precious and unique gift.

The ALA Library Bill of Rights, first written by Forrest Spaulding for the Des Moines Public Library, was adopted by ALA in San Francisco in 1939. It has encouraged librarians to hold to the principle that the users of free public libraries must have the opportunity to examine all information on all sides of all issues. In 1941 Mr. Spaulding reported to the Council of ALA that in general the public seemed to understand the aim of preserving opportunities for free reading in libraries.

Ten years later some people may have thought that there was something paradoxical about the strong stand against censorship taken by librarians.

Outside observers are likely to view the keepers of books as by nature rather conservative. And so they are. Since it is the peculiar function of librarians to preserve the records of man's dreams, failures, and achievements, there is nothing remarkable about their respect for old traditions.

But perhaps there *seems* to be something surprising about the vigorous resistance of

librarians to those who attempt to insist that their private prejudices shall control library book selection. Have these conservative keepers of books lost their perspective and become advocates of dangerous ideas?

The pressures for censorship have focused our attention upon the function of libraries as communications agencies in our society. A democratic society has need for all the information it can get. The library is one of the *chief* sources, if only because it contains both books and periodicals presenting all points of views. It is a very important source of information, but it can be significant only so long as it holds to its principles.

It cannot be overemphasized that the library can do no better than any other institution, if it surrenders its principles to the expediency of the moment. If a church, a labor union, or a monopoly can control—or materially influence—the selection and distribution of library materials, then the library's proper function in a free society cannot be exercised.

Forrest Spaulding recognized this in 1940 and asked the ALA Council to appoint a standing committee to throw the force and influence of the ALA behind any individual librarian or library board confronted with any demands for censorship of books or other material upon a library's shelves. Sterling North and Alfred C. Nielsen joined Mr. Spaulding in this recommendation, and the Council voted unanimously to authorize appointment of a Committee on Intellectual Freedom.

In May 1940 the committee was created by Council, with the title: Committee on Intellectual Freedom to Safeguard the Rights of Library Users to Freedom of Inquiry. The committee was created to recommend such steps as may be necessary to safeguard the rights of library users in accordance with the Bill of Rights of the United States and the Library Bill of Rights as adopted by Council in 1939. The original committee consisted of Forrest Spaulding, chairman; Jens Nyholm; and Hiller C. Wellman.

Apparently not much happened in 1942 and 1943. In 1944 Leon Carnovsky, chairman, strongly urged that ALA adopt a posi-

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tive plan of action to meet censorship. In 1945 the committee members were: Emily M. Danton, Frederick G. Melcher, Jens Nyholm, Ruth Rutzen, Marian D. Tomlinson, and Leon Carnovsky, chairman.

The annual report of the Committee for the period 1944-1945 was as follows: ¹

With the approval of the ALA Executive Board and Council, the committee formulated a statement, "On Defending the Freedom to Read in Libraries," and requested its publication by national and state library periodicals. The response was excellent and the statement received wide publicity. Through this statement librarians were invited to report to the committee incidents of attempted interference with the provision of books or periodicals, and it was hoped that such reports would make up the bulk of the committee's annual statement.

Up to the present time very few incidents have been reported, and the committee has been requested not to publicize them. The lack of information about such incidents may mean that they do not exist—that librarians are generally free from interference in their book selection practices. On the other hand, it may mean that librarians do not care to report interference. Or, finally, it may mean that librarians are so cautious in policies of book selection that they avoid "incidents" before they have a chance to occur. Whatever the meaning, the fact remains that the committee has received very little indication of interference with the freedom to read in libraries. . . .

The statement referred to above is interesting still. It appeared in the *Wilson Library Bulletin* of December 1944:

ON DEFENDING THE FREEDOM TO READ IN LIBRARIES

Every librarian hates censorship. His decision to add a book or periodical to the collection is not arbitrary but is based on the conviction that the book is of value and interest to his patrons. Once he has made his decision in accordance with that policy, he should not be overruled by persons who want to prevent others from reading what they themselves disapprove of. This type of interference in library operation is frequently accompanied by threats so serious as to force the librarian to accede to it. Whenever he does accede he reluctantly restricts the freedom to read. Such action is directly contrary to the principles he believes in; that's why he hates censorship. . . .

No report seems to have been issued by the committee for 1946.

The annual report for 1946-1947 stated: ²

The past year has been one of continuous activity for the committee though it has not been productive of significant results. It has served to show, however, the basic difficulty in operation for such a committee as this. Mobilizing opinion and formulating group ideas into statements or recommendations for action through the tedious process of correspondence is a particularly ineffective way of dealing with issues as complex as those which are referred to this committee.

The attention of the committee was called to H.R. 263, "A bill . . . to declare certain papers, pamphlets, books, pictures, and writing nonmailable. . . ." The belief of the members was that, though the purpose of the bill was commendable, such legislation would set a bad precedent and was therefore against the public interest. A statement to this effect was sent to Paul Howard, then director of the ALA National Relations Office. No further action was necessary since the bill died in committee.

An executive order of December 5, 1946, established the President's Committee on Civil Rights whose duty is to prepare recommendations for "more adequate and effective means and procedures for the protection of the civil rights of the people of the United States." The Committee on Intellectual Freedom was asked to cooperate with the President's committee by describing its program of activity in the field of civil rights, reporting any specific findings, and making recommendations. Efforts to do this emphasized the fact that while a basic policy for free public libraries was established by the Council's adoption in 1939 of the Library Bill of Rights, the professional concern of all librarians, for the protection of "the first freedom" has not been converted into a plan for procedure. Such a program is urgently needed in cases when this specific civil right is threatened.

Acting on a request from the committee, the Council approved a change in its name from the previous long and cumbersome form to the Committee on Intellectual Freedom. Whether the statement of committee function should also be revised to make it more comprehensive is an open question.

On the current agenda of the committee are these matters which have been referred to it for consideration: proposal of the D.A.R. to keep public libraries "free from false and insidious doctrines"; the so-called decency resolution of the Massachusetts Library Association—the question being whether this should be adopted by the national association or one similar to it in purpose; H.R. 3970, a bill "to establish standards for education in the Constitution and American history for the District of Columbia. . . ." a bill which provides a virtual censor for schools and libraries in the District of Columbia; and three resolutions adopted by the Library Unions Round Table, referred by action of the Council on July 4, 1947. Members of the association are invited to contribute pertinent facts and opinions regarding any of these matters. Appropriate recommendations and resolutions will be presented at the Midwinter meeting of the Council.

Members of the committee were: Emily Miller Danton, Eudocia Stratton, Edna Elizabeth Gustafson, Donald E. Thompson, Frederic G. Melcher, Marian D. Tomlinson, Doris Ellen Wilson, and Alice G. Higgins, chairman.

Between 1946 and 1949 the Committee on Intellectual Freedom of the ALA periodically pondered the warning of Oliver Wendell Holmes to Arthur Garfield Hays. Justice Holmes warned young Mr. Hays that whenever one becomes interested in a subject, data seem to be drawn from every direction around the magnetic point. In such a situation allowance must be made for one's special interest, and one's conclusion cannot always be trusted. The committee frequently

¹ *ALA Bulletin*, 10/15/45, p. 391-2.

² *ALA Bulletin*, 10/15/47, p. 393-4.

considered the possibility that it had been making mountains out of molehills.

At Atlantic City in 1948 the committee reported that in Birmingham, Alabama, *Senior Scholastic* had been banned from all schools because of an issue devoted to the theme of human brotherhood. Newark, New Jersey, schools had banned the *Nation* for the allegedly anti-Catholic articles by Paul Blanshard. *Building America* was under attack by the Tenney Un-American Activities Committee in California, which objected to a magazine that, while picturing America's achievements, also admitted that some social problems were still to be solved. The *New Republic* was removed from the Champaign, Illinois, Public Library. Several books were banned from New York City high schools. An attack had been made upon the librarian of the Grand Rapids, Michigan, Public Library. The American Legion was on record as determined to clean all "subversive" literature out of schools and classrooms. The D.A.R. adopted a similar resolution in May 1947 and there were various other rumors of censorship or attempts to restrict Americans in their access to information. In brief, that was the situation in June 1948. Was censorship a mountain or a molehill? The committee was not sure. But it asked the ALA Council to reaffirm the Library Bill of Rights.

At this 1948 conference also the committee joined with the ALA Board on Personnel Administration to recommend a policy against the use of loyalty investigations. This resolution was adopted, but was the subject of debate through three succeeding meetings, until finally the matter was resolved at Cleveland in 1950. This policy as finally adopted reads:

We, the Council of the American Library Association, strongly protest loyalty programs which inquire into a library employee's thoughts, reading matter, associates, or membership in organizations, unless a particular person's definite actions warrant such investigation. We approve the affirmation of allegiance to our government. We condemn loyalty oaths and investigations which permit the discharge of an individual without a fair hearing. We hold that in a fair hearing the accused is furnished a statement of the charges against him, is allowed to see the evidence against him, is given an opportunity to prepare and to present his defense and to question his accusers with the aid of legal counsel, is presumed innocent until proved guilty, and is given the opportunity, if adjudged guilty, of judicial review.

This is a summary of the first of three policies recommended by the committee and adopted by Council. The Council at the Cleveland conference also unanimously

adopted a resolution recording its opposition to the Maryland Ober Law,

because we believe it to be a definite threat to the constitutional rights of librarians since it permits their discharge on the principle of guilt by association in lieu of direct evidence of subversion, and we support the Maryland Library Association in its efforts to have the law repealed.

These policies were adopted as expressions of belief that *routine investigation of all library employees* is unnecessary and weakening to the profession. Along with the American Association of University Professors, the library profession has consistently held that guilt is personal, and that an individual should be judged by his acts, not his opinions.

If an American librarian *acts* to promote exclusively the ideas sponsored by his organization, excluding contrary views from the library, such an act would constitute a threat to free inquiry, and ultimately to all freedom. Librarians are educators, and educators must never be propagandists for a single, exclusive, orthodox view of truth.

At Atlantic City in 1948 the Council reaffirmed the revised Library Bill of Rights, and in January 1951 the Peoria case involving film censorship caused a footnote to be added to make it clear beyond any possible doubt that this official statement of policy applied to all the media of communications collected or used by libraries.

After 1949 the Committee on Intellectual Freedom had few doubts that censorship is a major problem. Many cases have been reported in library literature, the latest being Laurence Kipp's fine story of the attempt by the *Boston Post* to force the Boston Public Library to censor communist literature and the Blanshard books.

In September 1951 the Field Foundation set up a fund of \$15,000 to be used by the committee over a two-year period. This fund made it possible to get the committee together at least once a year, thus removing the problem, noted in 1946, of conducting the committee's business by correspondence. The fund now pays a part-time executive secretary, and finances the committee's newsletter. The Field grant also made it possible for the committee to hold a two-day preconference institute on intellectual freedom at the Bar Association in New York in June 1952.

William Dix, committee chairman, opened this meeting by saying that the librarian's professional function is to disseminate information on all sides of every issue. At the same time, he declared, he would not want his library used as a tool by communists or

by any other group which denied the fundamental thesis of a free society—that truth must have complete freedom to combat error in the market-place of ideas.

Mr. Dix also cited the Library Bill of Rights, which is, of course, the basic, official statement of ALA policy in regard to free inquiry. It has been studied in New Zealand, Great Britain, India, and Japan.

A third policy recommended by the committee is that on labeling library materials. This question of labeling was raised first by the Sons of the American Revolution in Montclair, New Jersey. It was also an issue in Burbank, California. It resulted in an ALA policy which states:

Librarians should not use the technique of labeling as a means of predisposing readers against library materials. Although totalitarian states find it easy and even proper, according to their ethics, to establish criteria for judging publications as "subversive," injustice and ignorance rather than justice and enlightenment result from such practices, and the American Library Association has a responsibility to take a stand against the establishment of such criteria in a democratic state.

Libraries do not advocate the ideas found in their collections. The presence of a magazine or book in a library does not indicate an indorsement of its content by the library. . . . Although we are all agreed that communism is a threat to the free world, if materials are labeled to pacify one group, there is no excuse for refusing to label any item in the library's collection. Because communism, fascism, or other authoritarianisms tend to suppress ideas and attempt to coerce individuals to conform to a specific ideology, American librarians must be opposed to such "isms." We are then anticommunist, but we are also opposed to any other group which aims at closing any path to knowledge.

This policy against prejudicial labeling of library materials was recommended to the Council by the Committee on Intellectual Freedom by Rutherford Rogers, chairman, in Chicago in 1951 and passed unanimously.

Now to complete the roster of earlier committee members, in 1948 Emily M. Danton, Marion Hawes, Ralph Ellsworth, Frederic Melcher, Evelyn Benagh, Doris Wilson, and David Berninghausen, chairman, made up the membership. In 1949 Marion Horton and Hiller Wellman were added, and in 1950 Carroll C. Moreland and Rutherford Rogers became members of the committee, with Mr. Rogers acting as chairman in 1950-1951. William Dix became chairman in 1951, and Mabel Conat, Ralph Hudson, Lachlan MacRae, and John E. Smith became new members.

After 1948, when more and more cases were reported to the committee, there came a question as to whether the national group

should protest against censorious action directly or work through local library organizations. There would certainly be a risk in some cases that action by a national committee might cause unnecessary resentment on the grounds that it was interference by an outside group.

This question caused the committee in 1948 vigorously to encourage state library associations to create state committees on intellectual freedom. A letter was sent to every state association and follow-up letters also went out. At one time about half of the states and some regional associations had such committees. California had one of the earliest and strongest committees—in fact the national group learned much from California's experiences. Recently Illinois, Iowa, and Massachusetts have had very active groups working to preserve free reading for library users.

Although the national committee strongly urged the states to appoint committees *before* an incident was known to have occurred in the state, some states did not recognize any need for a committee. For example, New Hampshire and Oklahoma were thus forced to rely on the individual courage of librarians who had no support from their state associations. In New Hampshire Keith Doms and Mildred Peterson McKay helped to defeat legislative censorship. In Oklahoma Ralph Hudson and Frances Kennedy performed noble service in investigating the Bartlesville affair. However, if a committee had already been in existence when Ruth Brown of Bartlesville was first under criticism, the results might have been different. In Massachusetts the state committee once had only twelve hours notice, but was able to send a representative to be heard on a censorship bill.

It has been the consistent policy of the Intellectual Freedom Committee to encourage action by state groups, with the national committee formally protesting censorious action only when invited in by local people or when no state group exists.

This chronicle has emphasized the early years of the committee because it is assumed that its early history is less well known. Since the 1948 convention library literature has given good coverage on the major cases requiring the committee's attention. For the stories of Los Angeles, Burbank, Bartlesville, or Peoria, the bibliography entitled "Library Literature" is a basic reference.

ALA's three basic policies on free inquiry have been summarized above. Perhaps the

three following points about these policies should be emphasized.

The Library Bill of Rights was not drawn up to protect librarians. Its purpose is to preserve the right of *every citizen* to read whatever he wishes, forming his own private judgments. Librarians are keepers of books *for* their patrons, not *from* them.

ALA policy makes the responsibility of professional librarians clear. As members of ALA we are committed to resisting pressures to restrict the reading of American citizens, whether such pressures come from social, patriotic, religious, or any other groups.

These ALA policies were not imposed upon this organization of 20,000 librarians by any central government, or by any other *authority*. Such authority as they have derives from the ALA itself, a democratically organized professional association. These policies were drawn up by the ALA Committee on Intellectual Freedom, the duly appointed body of the organization, then submitted to the Council, the acting body of ALA, for full discussion and debate. The committee has always held that no document is above criticism. This includes all ALA policy statements.

At the beginning of this narrative, it was suggested that there might seem to be a paradox in the picture of conservative librarians resisting censorship. But is there any real paradox? Is it surprising, really, for this conservative profession to seek to preserve the freedom of every citizen to read what he wishes and form his own opinion?

No, it should startle no one to find that librarians recognize the validity of Alfred North Whitehead's two principles. This distinguished philosopher noted two principles which he considered inherent in the very nature of things—the spirit of change, and the spirit of conservation. Professor Whitehead said:

There can be nothing real without both. Mere change without conservation is a passage from nothing to nothing. . . . Mere conservation without change cannot conserve.

By accepting the challenge to act as conservators of the American heritage of free inquiry, librarians have recognized and accepted *both* of Professor Whitehead's principles—the spirit of change and the spirit of conservation. They have—at one and the same time—preserved the most precious of our traditions—freedom of inquiry—and yet stood ready to welcome the new concepts, the new theories, the constructive thought of future creators. Librarians have thus helped to provide the opportunity for the continued advance of knowledge and the growth of individuals. Upon these two factors depends the future of our democracy, and indeed, of all humanity.

Adopted by Council of American Library Association at Atlantic City on June 18, 1948

Library Bill of Rights *

The Council of the American Library Association reaffirms its belief in the following basic policies which should govern the services of all libraries:

1

AS A RESPONSIBILITY of library service, books and other reading matter selected should be chosen for values of interest, information and enlightenment of all the people of the community. In no case should any book be excluded because of the race or nationality, or the political or religious views of the writer.

2

THERE SHOULD BE the fullest practicable provision of material presenting all points of view concerning the problems and issues of our times, international, national, and local; and books or other reading matter of sound factual authority should not be proscribed or removed from library shelves because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

3

CENSORSHIP OF BOOKS, urged or practiced by volunteer arbiters of morals or political opinion or by organizations that would establish a coercive concept of Americanism, must be challenged by libraries in maintenance of their responsibility to provide public information and enlightenment through the printed word.

4

LIBRARIES SHOULD ENLIST the cooperation of allied groups in the fields of science, of education, and of book publishing in resisting all abridgment of the free access to ideas and full freedom of expression that are the tradition and heritage of Americans.

5

AS AN INSTITUTION of education for democratic living, the library should welcome the use of its meeting rooms for socially useful and cultural activities and discussion of current public questions. Such meeting places should be available on equal terms to all groups in the community regardless of the beliefs and affiliations of their members.

**By official action of Council on 3 February 1951, the Library Bill of Rights shall be interpreted as applying to all materials and media of communications used or collected by libraries.*



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